

Effective Design of English Homework for Students in Senior Middle School

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Abstract

As the extension and supplement of classroom teaching, homework is a feedback of teaching achievements, playing a very important role in the process of teaching. This paper will analyze the current situation of English homework for senior middle school students and discuss the main problems of it, which cover the quantity, the form and the effectiveness. In order to stimulate students' interests in English learning, improve their English level, and construct scientific homework assignment system, this paper will try to put forward some proposals to solve or decrease those problems of designing homework, which include the new concepts of designing homework, effective homework design and layout, assessment design, so as to improve the effectiveness of English homework.

Keywords

Homework design; homework assessment; senior middle school.

1. Introduction

As the extension and supplement of classroom teaching, homework is a feedback of teaching achievements. Good homework can help teachers understand the relationship between teaching and learning, and then adjust the teaching process and methods accordingly. Furthermore, it helps students apply their knowledge to extracurricular activities, review and preview more efficiently. Teaching practice has proved that effective design of senior middle school English homework should avoid problems like generalization, non-layering, mechanization and no feedback.

Homework is defined as a set of activity done outside the class and without direct and real-time supervision of the teacher but with direct or indirect linguistic objectives and communicative objectives. It is a formative assessment that allows teachers to adjust their instructional practice in order to meet the individual needs of students. When appropriate, teachers should design homework to deepen students' knowledge of informational content or to have students practice a skill, strategy, or process. Homework is an opportunity for corrective feedback and should not be used as formal assessment.

The purpose of students' work is to consolidate and digest what they have learned in class and transfer knowledge into skills and techniques. Homework should be effective to broaden students' horizons and develop their intelligence. Meanwhile, it improves students' interests and develops creative and practical ability of students. The primary purpose is to improve communicative competence, which combines work with students' real life.

Large class situation is very common in China; teachers can not pay attention to every student because of the large number of students in every class, so the personality of each student can not be well developed. Therefore, English homework should be designed to fully stimulate and display the autonomy, enthusiasm, initiative and creativity of student body, adapting a variety of jobs to meet with different personalities, different basics and different interests of

individuals. Therefore, careful designs of a good student's extra-curricular work, for the students' ability to work independently and develop good habits, for the development of intellectual and creative talents of students, are of great significance. In order to improve the effectiveness of homework and stimulate students' interests in English learning, this paper will try to put forward some proposals to solve those problems of designing homework, which include the new concepts of designing homework, effective homework design and layout, assessment design.

2. Current Situations and Problems of English Homework in Senior School

2.1. Current Situations

Homework is the extension of classroom. Effective homework can strengthen and promote the effectiveness of classroom teaching. However, it is observed that the homework for students are usually traditional jobs, such as copying and memorizing words, reading, listening to audio and so on. They lack of innovation and freshness, which is easy to stifle students' interests in learning.

Usually, teachers pay more attention to class teaching while the design of extra-work and feedback is ignored because it takes up a large proportion of teachers' time after school hours. On the other hand, students themselves complain that the homework they are given is boring or pointless, referring to homework tasks that consist of studying for tests, doing workbook exercises, finishing incomplete class work, memorizing lists of vocabulary and writing compositions. It is often the case that homework is regarded as a tool for the teacher to punish students who cannot finish learning tasks very well.

Other negative effects of poorly managed homework include lacking of necessary leisure time and cannot deal with increased differences between high and low achievers. These problems are often the causes of avoidance techniques such as completing homework tasks in class, collaborating and copying or simply not doing the required tasks. In turn, conflicts may arise between learners, teachers, parents and the institution.

2.2. Problems

2.2.1. Homework to Be Assigned Casually and Not Systematically

As for the quantity and quality of the assignments, some teachers are very casual. They usually employ the material provided directly rather than designing by their own. In addition, influenced by the exam-oriented education, teachers tend to engage students in the sea of tests. Homework is assigned to achieve simply quantity but not quality and increase students' burden. What's worse, this kind of homework is not only time-consuming, but also gradually kill the students' interests in learning English. On the other hand, a large amount of traditional homework was assigned but lack of effectiveness, resulting in a very passive attitude towards students. When assign homework, the teacher pursues that students would be proficient in solving grammar problems on papers. Consequently, a lot of work is arranged. It is observed that senior high school students' homework includes English exercise book, English newspapers and uncountable test papers. Over time, it is no doubt that student would lose interest in learning English.

2.2.2. Homework Lacking of Practice and Hierarchy

Over the years, more attention is paid to the classroom teaching, while research and reform outside class is ignored. When job designed, in order to consolidate language points, the content is always limited to English books. It gets away from the students' real life. The form of homework is monotonous and machinery. It's usually to copy and memorize words, phrases or texts, meanwhile little attention is paid to train listening, speaking, reading, writing. Apart from that, assignments are unified for the whole class. As a result, different basics and personalities

of students are ignored. Moreover, there is no flexibility in job design and they lack of hierarchy. These situations are bound to cause other conflicts, such as some students are hungry for homework but some students cannot finish and result in common phenomenon that copying homework.

2.2.3. Homework Evaluation Ignoring Process and Motivation

Traditional job is evaluated according to the right and wrong answers of students and their time to complete, simply can not reflect the process of homework. In addition, traditional jobs evaluation often focuses on objective results of operation itself and contempt students' emotion and attitude. There is no real emotion interaction of homework between students and teacher, which seriously affects enthusiasm and learning initiative of students.

3. Approaches to Improve Effectiveness of Homework

3.1. Emphasis on Integration and Diversity

As we all know, single type of jobs and repeated copying work or reciting can easily lead students to revolt and cause fatigue. Thus teachers have to skillfully integrate different types of operations when they design homework and employ a variety of training methods to practice the same language points, which effectively strengthen students' knowledge and skills. Language skills include listening, speaking, reading, writing and the capability of applying them integrally. Students should obtain this ability through specific and comprehensive language practicing activities. Therefore, listening, speaking, reading and writing are not only content of learning but also methods. Their training should be taken into account when teachers design homework. In addition, learning efficiency would be improved if more organs participate and various forms of homework can promote students' balanced development. With these reasons, integration and diversity should be fully taken into account when teachers make assignments.

English homework is generally used in the form of written work and oral work. For senior high school students, integration of homework reflects in two aspects. On the one hand, oral work, written work and reading work should be combined; on the other hand, homework which includes learning tasks should reflect certain of integration. Firstly, as a language, English requires a good ability of listening and speaking. However, it needs especial language environment. For Chinese students, reading and listening are effective ways to make up the lack of environment. Students not only experience the context but also strengthen their sense of language and make fundamentals for speaking and writing. During the period of senior high school, it is necessary to train students' reading ability through assigning certain of jobs, meanwhile, promoting their self-correction of pronunciation and inputting grammar information, vocabulary information and knowledge. According to learning content, teachers can assign some oral work, such as making sentences or dialogues, retelling story, classroom performances, doing reports and so on. Written work should be arranged with reasonable quantity and good quality. Secondly, the task should reflect its integration whatever it is oral work or written work. Teachers can design integrate activities or tasks to develop students' linguistic performance, such as writing story, making posters, describing characters or events with pictures and their own words, solving problems in real life and so on. These tasks enable students to develop and train their language skills, thinking and imagination, so that those who have different strengthens or preferences would get pleasure from the job.

Apart from integration, teachers also need to think about diversity. As learning content increased, the forms of tasks must be updated from making choices, memorizing words and texts to having conversations, answering questions, summarizing, retelling and so on. According to the purposes of homework, it can be divided into four categories. The first category is the practice type, which means that help students master the special skills and consolidate what they have learned in class. The second one is preparation type, which enables

students to get ready to learn a new lesson. The third one is extension type, which expands students' knowledge and information they gained in class, migrating them to new situations. The fourth one is creation type, which provides opportunities for students to criticize errors and solve problems, improving their creative ability. Extended homework and creative homework are more in line with the characteristics of senior high school students, their interests in learning will be stimulated and their self-development will be promoted. Therefore, teachers need to design homework elaborately according to the actual operating conditions. When design task for students, teachers can get down from the following aspects: language skills and knowledge, language hierarchy, exercises forms, ways to deal with, activity forms and activity ways and so on. For instance, after learning Unit 1 "Friendship" in New Senior English for China Student's (NSECS) Book 1, the teacher can put forward some questions: 1. Talking about one of your good friends or classmates. 2. Saying something about the friendship between you and your friend. 3. Talking about the importance of friendship. 4. Have you experienced any trouble in keeping friends? How can we make our friendship last long? And then design different forms of tasks for students, such as conversation, speech, discussion, debate or topic writing.

3.2. Emphasis on Practice and Inquires

As we all know that the best learning motivation of student is that they have interests in the material they will learn. Interest is the best teacher of learning English. If teachers want homework is helpful to students, they should strike to design original and unique works, which must be conformed to reality of students. Only students interest in what they learn can they be guided to fully develop language skills. Practical English homework is beneficial not only to improve students' intelligence but also to develop their self-management ability and cognition ability. For the purpose, homework should become a helpful hand to encourage students to try and practice actively and develop their ability to express thoughts and communicate in English. When design practical tasks for students, teachers should make full use of imitating real conversational context, such as surveys in daily life, communication about school life, holiday activity, shopping, seeing a doctor, talking about the weather, discussing about hot topics in society, inquiring of history or technology. Let students learn in real life and environment. In other words, the homework must be feasible and completed in English. So teachers can design some types of homework for students as follows:

1. talk with foreigners, telephone to them and record messages
2. listen to English reports or notices
3. enjoy English movies or TV programs
4. organize English games
5. write to English-speaking people or send e-mails.
6. participate in English debates and English speeches

The teacher needs to select the appropriate type of operation according to the specific content of teaching materials. Here are some examples. 1. After learning Unit 9 "Introduce myself" in NSECS Book 2, the teacher requires students to send an e-mail to a foreign pen pal to introduce themselves. The task not only teaches students how to use correct English letter format, but also let them try to introduce themselves in several ways and master the skills of sending and receiving e-mails. 2. After learning Unit 3 "Plants" in NSECS Book 4, the teacher gives students websites and it is a good idea to ask them to find out the Chinese names and English names of three plants, and then compare their characteristics. This homework is closely linked with students' real life. It not only deepens their understanding of classroom knowledge, but also expands the learning content, so as to improve teaching efficiency. 3. After learning Unit 6 "Hamburg business" in NSECS Book 5, the teacher can ask students to investigate the origin and sources of KFC and McDonald products, the English name of goods in their stores, merchandise

features, prices and so on. Then compare the two fast-food restaurants. It is believed that students would do the job very carefully and have their own unique insights.

On the other hand, senior high school students are always eager to perform themselves and have strong desire to create with their hands. Teachers can make assignments to stimulate their interests such as designing cards in English, learning songs and having games, home-made New Year's greeting cards written in English, writing English reports and so on. Teachers also can assign some professional and inquiring work to encourage students to think and research positively, making self-discovery. For instance, after learning Unit 4 "Holidays and festivals", the teacher can require students work in groups to look for the names of main national holidays, their origins and characteristics through Internet, and then make posters. The activity not only enables students to master relevant vocabulary, but also makes students understand customs of foreign countries, stimulating imagination and creativity of them. Apart from that, it gets students know about their strengths between each other and the importance of cooperation. This is beneficial to develop their practical ability, creativity and cooperation awareness. In order to encourage students' autonomy inquiry and cultivate their creative thinking, it is advisable to design open and autonomous assignment, which means it has no only one answer but allows students to express different ideas. The type of operation is flexible enough to inspire students' thinking. In order to improve the practical effectiveness of open homework, the teacher must have a good guidance for students in advance. Take writing as an example, senior high school students need to write a composition with 80-100 English words. The teacher cannot give students just a title or a theme, but have guidance before writing. The task can be completed by answering five or six questions. The answer of the first question is the topic sentence of the article, which can help students to highlight its theme. Questions in the middle must be asked more carefully because their answers must support the topic sentence. The answer of last question should be a short summary of the article. Students would better understand the structure and framework of their articles through prior guidance, which help them to write easily. In addition, teacher can have them design homework for themselves, especially during the period of revision. Obviously, compared to traditional revision form, students' dominant role is reflected through self-designing homework.

3.3. Emphasis on Hierarchy and Extension

Different students have different characteristics. They also have differences in language basics, the ability of understanding and accepting and so on. Consequently, it is necessary to design hierarchical homework to meet with different needs of students. At the same time, it reflects learners' choices and personalized demands, which encourage students to participate actively and get more success (Yao 50). Take listening task as an example, for superior students, teacher can require them to have conversational performance or retell the material if they have understood completely; for medium students, they should catch the key information then answer questions and try to be familiar with the material; for inferior students, they should listen to and read the material by following the audio and try to understand then answer some simple questions. Another example, after learning Unit 1 "Festival around the World" in NSECS Book 3, the teacher can provide three kinds of exercises which are to rebuild the text structure for different levels of students, guiding them to experience the text structure and the usage of language points of the passage. The three kinds of exercises are stated as follows.

Group A: According to the main idea of the passage to retell the story. It is easy comparatively.

Group B: According to key language points to imitate the text structure and describe one traditional festival in China. The difficulty is increased.

Group C: Compare the differences between China and foreign countries, and then design a similar festival and the ways to celebrate.

As for inferior students, the teacher must deal with the material or relevant exercises before assigning tasks, reducing its quantity and difficulty so that keep students' learning initiative.

As a rather practical subject, English teaching cannot be limited to knowledge and content of books. Otherwise, it will be difficult to broaden students' horizons and improve their linguistic performance in English. Therefore, the teacher needs to guide students to expand thinking space and practice space. This kind of extension can be divided into two forms. That is, the extension of topics in the same scope which help to train students' ability in expressing. For instance, extend asking the way to asking the prize, asking the flight. Another one is the extension of reading materials which help to promote students' reading and writing. Senior high students are encouraged to read more extracurricular material like English newspapers, English Salon. For example, with the fundamental of learning NSECS Book3, Unit 1 "Festival around the World", the teacher requires students to read other articles about Chinese and foreign traditional festivals, then according to the time, preparation, special food, history, story, symbol, celebration activities, themes, principles to choose one festival to have class reports or communication. By doing the job, students not only consolidate language points but also master some writing skills.

4. Assessment Design

4.1. Diversified Evaluation

English homework demands variety, so does its assessment criteria. Firstly, we should change the assessment form from single teacher's assessment to students' self-assessment, interacted assessment in groups, parents' participation and teacher's summary. In this way, the role of students would be changed from passive to active ones, meanwhile, encouraging them to finish assignment well. According to different level of students, it is necessary to adopt different assessment standards, giving more encouragement. It will stimulate their passion if they are appreciated from various angles. Sometimes, homework cannot be satisfied in one time, we need to provide them more chances to correct and improve.

4.1.1. Students Self-assessment

Traditional jobs emphasize the role of teachers. Assessment of homework is limited to teachers which not only affect results of work but also strike students' confidences and it is not beneficial to develop their independent spirit. Thus, we must change traditional evaluation methods into student-centered ways so that reflect interaction between teacher and students. Students should be offered opportunities to participate in job evaluation, which strengthen understanding of what they have learned. In the evaluation, students are not passive recipients, but active participants. They would correct their attitudes towards study and adjust learning methods through evaluating and analyzing their own inadequacies, which help them to achieve best learning effect.

4.1.2. Group Peer Assessment

Group evaluation should be based on evaluation of students' attitude, manner, emotion, and good at capturing the bright spots of student assignments. In the group, evaluation should be oriented so that stimulate students' interests in finishing homework and develop their good habits. Of course, group evaluation cannot be made randomly. Given some score standards before evaluating is a must. Through group peer assessment, students would be easier to find out their mistakes and problems, especially evaluation of composition.

4.2. Procedural Assessment

As famous American educational education expert D.L.Stufflebeem puts that, "the importance to evaluate is not to prove but improve" (212). Usually, teachers pay more attention to the result of homework than its process, which does not benefit for students to promote their

ability in tasks. Modern education demands that we concern about both of them. We should focus on process evaluation and pay more attention to the process and methods of completing, and the formation of associated emotions and cultural awareness. Monitoring and giving guidance to the process of finishing homework is a guarantee to improve the effectiveness of operations. When this kind of procedural assessment takes into effect in feedback and encouragement, students would obtain English knowledge and develop their skills by writing, communicating, imitating and inquiring and so on. Only in this way, can students learn and cooperate with others well. There is an example, teacher requires students to extract, analyze and self-evaluate their mistakes time to time, then find out learning gaps and make a wrong set of questions. In addition, the teacher takes a record of students' mistakes and progress is helpful to encourage them to self-correct and develop their habits of self-monitoring.

5. Conclusion

The process of learning is not only a kind of cognition process, but also inquires process. Students can consolidate and deepen new information through doing homework, meanwhile promoting their language skills. Education itself is the process to inquire and create. Teachers should constantly research new ideas and methods in teaching, guiding students to discover problems and solve them. How to promote the full development of every student is the key issue in the teaching. Facing with current problems in designing of homework, teachers firstly need to change those traditional concepts into new ones. Then change assignment forms, carefully design appropriate amount of homework and make reasonable innovation. On the other hand, teachers should make sure the homework is feasible for students, so that they are willing to work hard to finish rather than regard it as burden of learning. Effectively designed homework not only stimulate students' interests, guiding them to concern about life, but also encourage them to use their knowledge in real life and build up basics for their further study. In a whole, homework can be an effective and instructional strategy, but its value lies in that how students do and what they have learned from it. Flexible homework policies that allow schools and teachers to take into account the unique circumstances of their students are keys to making homework meaningful and beneficial for all.

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